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ABSTRACT

The International English Training for Adults Program is an intensive ESL (English as a Second Language) program for foreign students. Students in the program take 18 hours of classes per week, including Conversation Partners, a 3-hour course designed to give students an opportunity to practice using English with Americans in a structured, low-risk environment. Students meet for 1 or 2 hours a week with volunteer conversation partners, using suggested discussion topics for which students must prepare. Students are expected to keep a journal in which they write about what they talked about, what they learned, and what language problems they encountered during each meeting with their partners. They also tape record each meeting and write weekly in their journals about what they learn from listening to their tapes. A study was conducted with the Lancaster-Lebanon (Pennsylvania) International English Training for Adults Program, in Millersville, Pennsylvania, to improve the design of the Conversation Partners course by adding a structure that would foster learning autonomy and improve speaking and listening skills. The structure added was designed to develop language learning strategy awareness, increase the use of strategies, and encourage learners to seek new and different ways to enhance their own language learning experiences. Data collected after less than 2 months suggest that each participant met with some level of success, especially as they became more familiar with implementing the structure. Further research is needed, however, because the study was so brief. (KC)

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PRODUCT

"Pennsylvania Action Research Network:
Staff Development Through
Six Professional Development Centers"

Project Number 099-99-9010
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Project Director
Dr. Gary Kuhne
Assistant Professor and Regional Director of Adult Education
The Pennsylvania State University

Note: Action Research is a process of systematic inquiry credited to Kurt Lewin who popularized it in the U.S. in the 1940"s. Today it is considered a system of qualitative research. Typical of action research, none of the individual projects in this monograph series claims to have generalizable application beyond the specific project described. However, each monograph report can serve to be illustrative, instructive and provides the potential for replication in other locations. For a level of generalizability, it is recommended that the reader seek common patterns in the monograph reports in this series, and the wider literature, or contact the Action Research Network for assistance in this.

I. ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with Lancaster-Lebanon IU1's ESL program for foreign students, the International English Training for Adults Program, in Millersville, PA. The purpose of the study was to improve upon the design of the Conversation Partners course by adding a structure that would foster learner autonomy and improve speaking and listening skills. The structure added was designed to develop language learning strategy awareness, increase the use of strategies, and encourage learners to seek new and different ways to enhance their own language learning experiences.

After approximately 15 hours of participation in the course with the new structure in place, it was expected that students would be able to identify goals, plan and use strategies to meet their goals, evaluate their progress and improve their listening scores on the SLEP test. Additionally, it was hoped that the process would impact students' perceptions and behaviors. Data collected suggests that each participant met with some level of success; however, further research is warranted given the brevity of the study.

II. PROBLEM

Many learners are challenged by the enormity of the task of learning English. While they want to be able to communicate, they might be bogged down with details, particularly with correctness, and therefore lack the confidence to take advantage of the abundance of opportunities that immersion provides. Also, prior language learning experiences, cultural background, and other individual factors can influence one's approach to learning and using a second language. Some learners seem to have a natural talent for learning languages, while for others, it is a monumental undertaking. With the right structure, the latter learners can develop strategies to systematically overcome some of the boundaries, while all learners are able to better utilize time, energy, and experiences to improve language skills.

The International English Training for Adults Program is an intensive ESL program for foreign students. Generally students in the program are enrolled for 18 hours per week (one 9-hour course, one 6-hour course, and one 3-hour course) Conversation Partners, a three-hour course, was implemented to give students an opportunity to practice using English with Americans in a structured, low-risk environment. Students meet for one or two hours a week with volunteer

conversation partners. Suggested topics for discussion are provided for each week. The students must be prepared to discuss either the suggested topic or one of their choosing before they meet with their partners. The conversations are recorded, and the students write in journals about the conversations they had and about what they learned from listening to their tapes.

The Conversation Partners course stresses the development of listening and speaking skills. Many ESL learners lack a structure which can help them determine which areas of language learning to focus on and what to do to help themselves improve in those areas. Learners need to be able to identify goals, apply effective strategies to meet their goals, and assess their progress. The present course design allows for but does not require participants to plan their learning accordingly, through the use of a specific structure. As an instructor concerned about contextualized, learner-centered and self-directed language learning, Conversation Partners seems a perfect place to introduce a structure that will help learners communicate better and feel that their individual needs and goals are being addressed and met.

Conversation Partners is offered every semester. It is an opportunity for both the learner and instructor to individualize language learning. It is a course open for continuous improvement. Because of the adaptability of its structure, it is possible that other programs could adopt Conversation Partners, or some variation thereof, as part of their course offerings. Since its inception at International English Training, it continues to be a course in demand.

III. PLANNING

Participants in Conversation Partners, prior to the intervention, were expected to keep a general journal in which they wrote about what they talked about, what they learned, and/or language problems they might have encountered during each meeting with their partners. They also tape recorded each meeting and wrote weekly in their journals about what they learned from listening to their tapes.

For this project, participants were asked to listen to their tapes in order to identify a specific language learning goal. After choosing a focus, each learner was to plan some action to be taken during the next conversation partner meeting which would them help to meet the identified goal. After the next meeting during which they applied the strategies, the participants were to evaluate their language learning behavior and progress in their journals. The instructor made suggestions

for strategy use and provided feedback on a regular basis.

Before beginning the project, students filled out a Background Questionnaire (Appendix A) and a Self-Assessment (Appendix B) which provided such data as a student's native language and other languages spoken, language learning goals, length of English language study before enrollment, and self-perceived proficiency levels. A self-assessment was administered at the end of the project so that data could be compared. Additionally, all students took the Secondary Level English Proficiency Test (SLEP) upon entering the program and at the end of the semester.

Students were given explicit instructions about keeping a record of their appointments, goals, activities, and evaluation. It was explained that their journals would serve as a record for the project. They agreed in writing that data could be collected and used for the purposes of this study.

Basically, learning strategies are what a learner does in order to acquire, store, retrieve, and use information. All learners employ them, but to what extent and how well they are chosen, varies from one individual to another. Oxford defines learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1989, p. 8).

This project was undertaken with two assumptions in mind: 1) learners benefit from taking responsibility for their own language learning (setting goals, applying strategies, self-evaluating); 2) contextualized language learning (Conversation Partners) provides the opportunity for students to use English in real situations and automatically improves speaking and listening skills.

Do learners agree with these assumptions? In order to measure the success of the intervention undertaken by this project, it is necessary to take into account not only gains on standardized tests, but also changes in learners' behaviors and perceptions about their progress. Many factors can influence the outcomes of any assessment; for example, the beginning proficiency level, the length of stay in an immersion setting, the goals of the learners, etc. can effect how much and what kind of progress is made by each participant. It is difficult to compare one learner's progress to another's.

The issue of what constitutes good learning behavior has been approached from a few different angles. Researchers have had to rely heavily on limited observations and self-reporting by learners to determine which strategies were used at any given time for any number of reasons. This latter approach is justified in that there are many factors which cannot be changed or controlled by

the teacher or the learner; however, if learners are aware of what they do and why, they can take steps to improve on their own learning habits (Bialystok, 1981, p. 24).

One constraint of this project would be the learners' understanding of and ability to fulfill the requirements and articulate details of the process. Additionally, it might prove difficult to encourage reluctant students to remain on task throughout the project. It was hoped that monitoring and feedback from instructor would address such constraints.

For this project, success was to be measured by students showing any increase or change in strategy use, as indicated in their journals, as well as by an increase in proficiency levels, as perceived by the learner and indicated on the Self-assessment.

Additionally, SLEP scores from previous participants in Conversation Partners were used as a baseline measure of comparison. In the semester prior to this study (fall, 1998), students who participated for the whole semester gained, on average, a total of 11 points (raw score) on the listening portion of the test. Because the intervention of this project was implemented more than halfway through the semester (spring, 1999), participants in the study were expected to gain only 5 points on average.

Will the implementation of a specific structure in which ESL learners, during two-months participation in the Conversation Partners course identify language learning goals, plan and use strategies to meet their goals, and evaluate their own behaviors improve gains on a the listening portion of the SLEP Test and effect changes in the learners' perceptions of their skills and behaviors?

IV. ACTION

The intervention was implemented March 1, 1999 and ended before the semester on April 30, 1999. In all, each of the four participants had 10-12 one-hour appointments during which the intervention was in place.

First participants were informed about the project. I detailed the intervention so that the participants understood the purpose of the study and what changes were involved with the Conversation Partners course. Then I briefed the students on what language learning strategies are and gave them examples of what their journal entries would look like after going through one cycle of the process. I based the examples on goals I picked up from their previous journal writings

(Appendix C).

Once I was convinced that the students understood their role and were comfortable with participating, I obtained their written consent. I also informed the volunteers and obtained verbal consent from each of them.

The students began the process with their next conversation partner appointments. We ran into problems almost immediately. One constraint of the course is the limitation involved with volunteer schedules. There were times when appointments had to be canceled or rearranged. This sometimes interfered with the consistency and flow of the students' goal setting and strategy implementation. There were some other logistical problems such as students forgetting their tapes (and my learning about it after the fact) or equipment malfunctioning (or not being operated properly).

Another anticipated problem was that the participants struggled with the process itself. I held both group and individual meetings to try to address their concerns and answer questions. Some became accustomed more quickly than others; still, another issue was follow-through. One student simply lacked the interest, enthusiasm, and/or discipline (he never did explain his reason, so I can only guess) to do the assignments completely. All of the participants were lax in self-evaluating. By the end of the project, however, they all seemed to have mastered the process.

I collected their journals weekly and gave the students written and verbal feedback and suggestions. At the end of the semester, the participants completed another self-assessment as well as a final project (Appendix D). Finally, the students took the SLEP test.

V. RESULTS

According to the baseline set at the beginning of the project, all participants met or exceeded expectations on the SLEP test. As stated above, participants were expected to have a minimal raw score gain of 5 points. It should be noted, however, that other factors contributed to these gains. In addition to participation in Conversation Partners, students had 15 hours of class instruction as well as the benefits of individual study, practice and incidental exposure to the language. Interestingly, the student with the lowest beginning score ended with the highest gain. The students with the the shortest and longest amounts of time had the least gains.

The students were asked to rate their abilities language abilities and expectations for the

semester, on a scale from 1 to 10 (see Appendix B), 1 being the lowest rating. In this case, all participants failed to meet their own expectations with the following exceptions: Narumi felt that she met listening and speaking expectations, but indicated a negative overall gain; Henrique believed he reached his goal in overall ability, but indicated negative gains for speaking and listening. These inconsistencies might be attributed to varying interpretations of the questions or it could be that students, when assessing specific skills, measure performance in different ways, among other possibilities. I had hoped to do follow-up interviews to discuss the discrepancies, but time did not permit it.

Although the results of the self-assessment were a bit discouraging, the results of the final project shed new light on the matter. As with the self-assessment, for the final project, participants were asked to rate their English ability. However, this time participants were focused more on the Conversation Partners course. Perhaps this explains the difference in gains. As indicated by their answers on the final project, all students felt that both their speaking and listening skills had improved.

Based on the data, it would seem that the intervention was successful. However, there was a great deal of soft data that might be even more telling than that which is indicated by tables above. Because one of the aims of this project was to effect the learners' perceptions, strategy awareness and behaviors, it was decided that behavioral and attitudinal changes mentioned in journals, on the learner self-assessment and final project and would be considered positive outcomes. Because they deal directly with the effects of the Conversation Partners course, some of the changes that were stated on the final project are quoted below:

Ai - don't translate as much; answer more quickly; don't misunderstand as much

Ivoneide - more secure; faster; don't worry about correctness; lost fear of talking; can understand from context if not every word; guess meaning sometimes

Narumi - speaking without thinking, pay attention to pronunciation, understand teachers

Henrique - use vocabulary from studying, improved by a variety of listening activities

It was hoped that learners would be able to articulate their goals and progress throughout the project in their journals. As it turned out, much of the time, goals and strategies were blended together and little evaluation was recorded. Participants had the option of identifying one goal and continuing to strategize to meet the goal or changing goals and strategies periodically. There was no set pattern for any one participant. What did become clear was that students were making discoveries about behaviors they found to be helpful for improving certain skills or communication, seemingly despite the imposed structure, hence the blending of goals and strategies. Also, their goals and strategies became more detailed and focused as the project progressed.

For example, one student wrote for the first journal entry that she wanted to "understand everything," so she would practice more. That same student after several meetings and journal entries decided that she would speak "faster and fluently" by "thinking in English" and "talking to herself".

I believe, from the data collected and from the ongoing interactive feedback throughout the project, that this project was a success. The participants gained confidence, improved their language abilities, and learned about learning. While they might not have enjoyed some of the work involved, They felt that the process was worthwhile and they enjoyed the experience of Conversation Partners. Having examined the structure more closely, and taking into account the participants feedback, I anticipate making additional changes in the future. This is partly due also to the learner-centered philosophy that is a natural part of the International English Training Program.

VI. REFLECTION

While each learner met with his/her own success, the project itself had some shortcomings. Firstly, because it takes students such a long time to get used to the process, it would have been better if there was more time. Because of enrollment issues, this was not possible.

A second problem has to do with the structure itself. In the future I think it would be better to create a log that clearly delineates each part of the process. I think the structure was too loose. This might have led to a lack of focus and evaluation for some learners. Also, I would have students journal about their tapes and eliminate the general writing. Students felt that they did not have enough time to fulfill all of the requirements as well as they would have liked.

Thirdly, because I was interested to see how the process of strategy awareness would shape itself for each individual participant, and because I did not wish to influence goal and strategy choices, I did not do any explicit language learning strategy training. I am curious as to whether or not such training would have a greater impact on outcomes.

Many factors influence language learners' success with strategy awareness and use. There are many different ways to interpret the data that has been collected from this project. This report barely scratches the surface. It would be interesting to take a look at how learners from different cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds compare in their strategy use and willingness to try different ways of learning and practicing English. It would also be telling to examine what strategies are used at different levels of proficiency or for acquiring different skills. Do learners use different strategies in a variety of contexts? Would they use more and try others if they knew of them? Perhaps some students are just naturally more reflective and therefore benefit more than others from such activities. Perhaps it would be useful to have learners work collaboratively to discuss their strategy use and share best practices.

Throughout the history of the TESOL profession, while some educators and researchers sought out the best approaches, methods, and techniques to better aid their students in acquiring English as a second language, others looked to the learners, themselves, for insights which might ease the weight resting on the shoulders of teachers and students, alike. As in all educational disciplines, the search continues. As is the case with many issues in the field of TESOL, one good question simply leads to others. Perhaps it is in the good nature of educators to constantly seek out newer and better ways to enhance the learning behaviors of our students, particularly if we are asking the same of them.

Appendix A
PA-ARN Project
Questionnaire

Name _____ Age _____

Country _____ Native Language _____

Other languages spoken _____

How long did you study English before coming to the US? _____

Where did you study? How long at each? Write the amount of time next to each that applies.

_____ elementary _____ junior high _____ high school

_____ university other (explain) _____

How long have you studied English in the US? _____

What is your main reason for studying English? (Check only one)

_____ personal interest _____ school _____ work

Have you taken the TOEFL? _____ yes _____ no Score _____

Do you plan to take the TOEFL? _____ yes _____ no

Did you have specific language learning goals before coming to the US? _____ yes _____ no

Do you think you met those goals? _____ yes _____ no

Why or Why not?

_____

_____

COMMENTS: _____

_____

_____

Appendix B
Self-Assessment

Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 1:

1. a) How would you rate your English, in general, if #10 is perfect and #1 is poor? _____

b) What do you expect your ability level to be at the end of this course? _____

2. a) How would you rate your speaking ability now if #10 is perfect and #1 is almost no ability to speak English? _____

b) What do you expect your ability level to be at the end of this course? _____

3. a) How would you rate your listening ability now if #10 is perfect and #1 is understanding almost no English? _____

b) What do you expect your ability level to be at the end of this course? _____

Part 2:

1. a) How much time do you spend studying English at home? _____

b) What do you do? _____

2. a) How often do you watch TV? _____

b) What kinds of shows do you watch? _____

3. a) How often do you listen to the radio/music? _____

b) What do you listen to? _____

4. a) How often do you speak English outside of school? _____

b) With whom do you speak English? _____

5. I should do more...

_____

_____

_____

_____

Part 3:

6. When I don't understand someone speaking English I...

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. When English speakers don't understand me I...

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix C
Conversation Partners
PA-ARN Research Project
1999

Purpose: To find the best structure for students to use to improve their listening and speaking skills through participation in Conversation Partners

Method: To implement a specific structure requiring students to
A) identify goals
B) apply strategies to meet goals
C) evaluate process and progress

Evaluation: To compare performance (SLEP Test-listening pre/post scores), perceptions, and behaviors (CP journals, Self-assessment) at the beginning and end of the project

What's different?
Before starting this project, you were asked to write about your problems, concerns, and experience during your appointments with your partners, but you were not asked to do anything specific to solve problems or change the situation.

Now, each week you will
A) choose a language learning goal from listening to your tape (GOAL)
B) decide what to do to meet that goal the next time you meet with a partner (STRATEGY)
C) write about how well you did (EVALUATION)

An example of how it works.

Week 1: I listened to my tape and I realized that my partner speaks too fast. I cannot understand her all the time. I feel like I am missing a lot of the conversation. My goal is to understand everything.

Next time, my strategy will be to ask my partner to speak more slowly and repeat things when I do not understand the first time.

Week 2: (Journal Evaluation) After listening to my tape, I noticed that I asked my partner to slow down 4 times and to repeat 10 words. This helped me a lot. I could understand much more, but not everything my partner said. Some of the words were new and I still don't know what they mean. Next time, I will focus on understanding new words. If my partner says a new word, I will ask him/her to spell it and explain the meaning. I'll write it down. I will also continue to ask people to slow down and repeat when necessary.

Week 3: This time, I asked my partner to explain 4 new words. I wrote them down, but I am afraid that I will not remember the words later. Maybe some of the words are not so important to remember, but I think some are useful. Next time, I will try to use the words I learned when I am talking to my partner. Also, I'll review my new words list at the end of the week to check my memory.

Another thing that I noticed is that my partner corrects me when I say -ed endings. I must study when to pronounce those sounds. Next time, I will try to use them correctly.

Note: These are just some examples of the types of things you can study, try and learn during your participation in Conversation Partners. It's very important that you choose things that are important to you. This is a great chance for you to work on individual goals.

Have fun! .

Appendix D
Conversation Partners
Final Project

Name _____

For the questions below, rate your abilities on a scale from #1 to #5.
#5 is almost perfect ability and #1 is very low ability.

1. How would you rate your listening ability at the beginning of this course?
_____

How would you rate your listening ability at the end of the course?
_____

If your listening ability has changed, what can you do now that you could not do at the beginning of the course?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. How would you rate your speaking ability at the beginning of the course?
_____

How would you rate your speaking ability at the end of the course?
_____

If your speaking ability has changed, what can you do now that you could not do at the beginning of the course?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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